



**HUON HOOKE**  
**WINE**

Still good ... our winning wines. Photo: Quentin Jones

# Call for diversity uncorked

This year's NSW Wine Awards do not necessarily reflect available choices in our product.

DIVERSITY is the most recent catchcry of the NSW wine industry. It's a statement to raise the eyebrows of wine lovers in other states. If there is one thing interstate wine people probably don't think about NSW, it's diversity.

They think of the Hunter Valley, whose dry white semillons they acknowledge respectfully for their quality and uniqueness, while snorting at its reds. They think of Riverina botrytis wine, which they usually decry for being too sweet, heavy and unsubtle. They laugh about Mudgee's name and that's about it.

As you may predict, Hunter semillon did extremely well in this year's NSW Wine Awards (effectively the state wine show); so did Riverina sticky, but is this diversity or just wishful thinking?

Each year, the NSW Wine Awards judges (I was one this year) choose the state's top 40 wines for public exhibitions, dinners, tastings and other promotions. These are the 40 highest-scoring wines, not necessarily all gold medallists but they must be at least silver medal winners.

Looking at regions first, the list covers 10 of the state's 14 wine areas and comprises 16 Hunter Valley wines, six from Canberra, six Riverina, three Hilltops, three

Shoalhaven, two Mudgee and one each from Tumbarumba, Cowra and Murray-Darling plus one from Orange and the Hunter Valley (a semillon sauvignon blanc blend). Not a bad spread but it must be noted the big disappointment was Orange, which surely should have done better.

Now the grape varieties. There were 13 varieties or blends, as follows: nine semillon; nine shiraz, including three shiraz viognier blends; seven chardonnay, including one sparkling; four cabernet sauvignon, including one cabernet merlot; three botrytis, comprising two semillons and one blend; two riesling; two durif; one tannat; one albarino; one verdelho; one semillon sauvignon blanc.

It's a reasonable range of grape varieties and blends, although the stranglehold of semillon and shiraz, which always threatens to make the top 40 somewhat duochromatic, is still there.

If you counted all the wines with semillon in them, it comes to 13. However, it is good to see some left-field grapes making an appearance: tannat and albarino are rare in Australia, regardless of state or region. To me, the most interesting feature of the list is the success enjoyed by two regions, the Riverina and Shoalhaven, with



varieties or styles other than those for which they're noted. Shoalhaven produced the tannat (2007 Coolangatta Estate) and a cabernet sauvignon ('07, again from Coolangatta Estate). Excellent young full-bodied red from the Riverina is hardly a new phenomenon but it's always a nice surprise and both durifs (Westend 3 Bridges 06 and Deen De Bortoli 07), plus one shiraz (Westend 3 Bridges 06), came from the Riverina.

And finally, one of the biggest surprises of the show, a shiraz from Cowra, not only won a gold medal and made the top 40 but was voted best red of show. It is the 07 Swinging Bridge Shiraz, a smoothly balanced drop that combines spicy flavours and elegance with fully ripe richness.

I was there for the taste-off that determined the trophy for best white of show and this is how it panned out.

The best entries in each of six classes came together for the showdown: sparkling (Warraroong Claremont Sparkling Chardonnay 2002), riesling (Chalkers Crossing 2008), young semillon (Audrey Wilkinson Museum Reserve 2006), chardonnay (Mistletoe 2007), aged semillon (Coolangatta Estate 2001) and sweet white (Westend 3 Bridges Golden Mist Botrytis Semillon 2006). The Coolangatta bottle was compromised by a poor cork (it looked fresh and stunningly good in the earlier judging) but all the other wines were superb.

The Hunter is not renowned for fine sparkling wine but the Warraroong was superb: fine, creamy textured and complex, mature but fresh. It would stand tall in any company. The Westend botrytis semillon was rich, sweet and wonderfully decadent. The Chalkers Crossing riesling was fine, tight and mineral, just crying out for a piece of fish.

The Mistletoe Reserve chardonnay confirmed this recently emerged boutique

as one of the leading chardonnay makers of the Hunter. It was clearly the best chardonnay in the show, with intense grapefruit, passionfruit and honey aromas and a refined palate of seamless texture and balance. It tasted for all the world like a chardonnay grown in a substantially cooler climate but that is a compliment to proprietor Ken Sloan and his team. And it's not the first vintage this winery has fielded. It's a show-stopper of a chardonnay, managing to deftly combine delicacy with flavour complexity.

Despite these lovely wines, the winner of the secret ballot was the 2006 Audrey Wilkinson Museum Reserve Semillon. This is a stunning semillon, terrifically vibrant, ageing superbly, with great delicacy and intensity of lemon-citrus fruit which is echoed beautifully through a fine, understated palate that has just a touch of sweetness, probably from fruit rather than residual sugar. Great drinking now and for at least a decade hence.

So, does NSW wine have the much-touted diversity or not? In my view it does but the results of this year's awards do not really reflect it. There's more diversity than the top 40 makes out.

Although there isn't one pinot noir, Orange, Canberra and Tumbarumba should be able to supply something there. And Orange white wines, especially chardonnay, sauvignon blanc and riesling, are surely up to the mark, as are cabernet and shiraz from Mudgee. Ah well, there's always next year.

*The NSW Wine of the Year will be announced this evening. It will be in Cellar Talk next week. For a full list of the NSW Top 40, visit [nswwine.com.au](http://nswwine.com.au). For the chance to try the top 40 wines visit NSW Wine @ Wharf 8 tomorrow (5.30-8.30pm). Wharf 8, 53-59 Hickson Road, Sydney, \$35.*